

Hail to the Chief
(PART FOUR OF A FIVE PART SERMON SERIES—JESUS: THEN AND NOW)

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver at
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Mark 15.16-32

Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. And they began saluting him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. The inscription of the charge against him read, 'The King of the Jews.' And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!' In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.' Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

Two thousand twelve was a banner year for aficionados of the British monarchy. The media in Britain and around the world was filled with coverage of the royal family. And while there were stories of Prince William's heroics as helicopter rescue pilot, tales of Prince Harry's indiscretions, and grossly indecent invasions of the privacy of the Duchess of Cambridge, the lion's share of attention was devoted to Queen Elizabeth II, who celebrated the diamond jubilee of her accession to the throne. The anniversary was marked with street parties, a star-studded concert, a regatta on the River Thames, and, especially fitting given both her role as Supreme Governor of the Church of England and deep personal faith, a service of thanksgiving at Westminster Abbey.

But it wasn't just the beloved and widely admired member of the House of Windsor who currently reigns over the United Kingdom who made headlines. There was also the unresolved fate of the last of the Plantagenets, the late, unlamented Richard III.

You remember him, don't you, the man described by Shakespeare as a "foul, bunch-backed toad?" The king who for the past half millennium has endured a reputation as not only a usurper, but also a scheming, murderous, physically deformed, morally depraved embodiment of evil? The monarch whose modern image was so unflatteringly defined on film by the great Sir Laurence Olivier?

Well, thanks to the work of some archaeologists, one of the great standing mysteries of British history – the whereabouts of Richard's grave and remains – may have been solved. Using modern technology, researchers this past August located what they believe to be his final resting place. What is today a car park in Leicester, about 100 miles north of London, was the site more than five hundred years ago of a Grey Friars priory, and specifically, the establishment's choir, the place near the altar where great ceremonies and services took place. And there, in this spot, was found a skeleton, one that showed signs of scoliosis, a condition that would leave one shoulder higher than the other, and clear signs of violent death of the kind that Richard was known to have experienced. DNA tests of a direct descendent of the dead king's sister, a nephew seventeen generations removed, have been performed and the results are being analyzed. By December, what already appears to be a solid case may well be conclusively, definitively affirmed.

So, Richard III, having fallen in battle at Bosworth Field, may have been buried in the choir of a long-ago destroyed church. So what? Or, more to the point, so what does this have to do with us here, in this church, today?

A lot.

You see, the story told about Richard after his death had been long accepted as truth: he was evil; he was despised; he was so hated that after he was buried his remains were exhumed by the locals, who then unceremoniously tossed them into the river. Yes, there were, and remain, attempts to tell a different story, one that focused on his contributions to the development of English law and society, that posited he was actually a fairly good king in a difficult time. But the power of memory, of the version of events propagated by the Tudors, no less usurpers than Richard himself, prevailed, through the crafting of history, and the medium of the stage. How can a new understanding compete with a story so well-known, so powerfully recounted by none other than William Shakespeare, who worked from that chronicles that happened to have been written by supporters of Henry VII and his heirs?

Through a commitment to seeking the truth, no matter how much it might be at odds with what we believe.

Now nobody is suggesting that the discovery in Leicester will suddenly prove that Richard was a saintly, gentle man. But if it is shown that his remains were interred in and remained at what could only be seen as a place of honor, it would set aside those claims that those who knew him best, the people of the North of England, turned against him. It would also highlight the lengths to which the Tudors went to tell a story that would advance their cause and cement their power. Essentially, they said, “We are the rulers, we are the victors, history, the facts, will be what we say they are.”

But that’s not the way things work.

Sooner or later, the truth will out.

Which brings us to the cross, specifically the sign, known in Latin as a *titulum*, which announced the charges against the guilty, that was posted above Jesus’ head: King of the Jews.

It was, of course, meant to be ironic, a taunt, a cynical expression of power to any who would presume to challenge the primacy of Rome: Here’s your king, enthroned on a cross. Golgotha is his kingdom, the two criminals to either side of him his subjects.

Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews?

We don’t think so.

“Hail, king of the Jews!” jeered the soldiers, mocking a prisoner who by the world’s standards was an abject failure as a king.

Kings aren’t mocked. Kings aren’t scourged. Kings aren’t crucified.

Unless.

Unless the world’s standards were wrong, are wrong. Unless Jesus was offering a different form of kingship. Yet what kind of kingship leads to a cross?

One rooted in sacrifice, in giving, in serving, in loving.

Jesus, we know, was grounded in Scripture. What we call the Hebrew Bible was his holy book. He knew its songs, its laws, its stories. He knew of Israel’s checkered experience with kingship, of the hope for justice, equity, and restoration that had been invested in the House of David, and of the reality of two failed kingdoms, a litany of faithless, corrupt leaders, a people desperately seeking a new Exodus. He knew that Israel yearned for a leader who would set them free from oppression and who would cleanse the temple.

Jesus recognized that he was the one who was called to do this – but in a sign of how his understanding of kingship differed from that of the world, he believed that the oppression that needed to be combated wasn't so much that of a foreign power, for that power, as odious as it might be, would ultimately fail, but rather the sin that alienated people from their God and one another, and that the cleansing of the temple that was so necessary could only be achieved through the temple's replacement, with him, Jesus, being the place where God and humanity met.

Jesus also treasured the words of the prophets, Isaiah most of all. He knew of the servant songs, that told of one who would suffer on behalf of the people, and he came to know that he was to be that servant, which ultimately led him to the cross, where he took on the forces of darkness and death so that the world might know light and life.

And when Jesus suffered on the cross, it wasn't because of some strange, incomprehensible calculus of atonement in which God had to redeem a debt by sacrificing himself to himself. It was because in that moment, God stood in solidarity with humanity, experiencing and taking on all of our pain, loss, and anxiety, doing so in love that we might go forward freed from the crippling fear that can turn us away from our Creator and the lives we are meant to lead.

Yet how, we wonder, can we seriously claim that Jesus succeeded on the cross? Yes, his vision of kingship might have been radically different from what the world had known, one that offered a new, inspiring dream. But when we look around us, when we see illness, exploitation, disease, famine, hate, poverty, depravity, it seems all too obvious that the dream should not be confused with reality, that Jesus isn't king, that he failed.

Don't you believe it.

Jesus did not fail.

What was intended as irony is actually reality. Jesus of Nazareth is King of the Jews – and of the entire world. That all is not right with creation does not mean Jesus is not king, just that God's reconciling work continues. Think of David, the anointed king of Israel, who spent the early part of his reign on the run from his predecessor, the forsaken, embittered Saul. In those days, though David was indeed the rightful monarch, without qualification or reservation, his kingdom had not yet fully come into being. And so with Jesus we can proclaim that while the kingdom of God is here, it is also still unfolding, around us, in us, and through us.

Around us? In us? Through us? What does this mean? Simply that the kingdom of God isn't some place out there, some event that will transpire at a time uncertain in the unknown future. Nor is it mere metaphor; it is rather the reality that God intends for creation, and it can be found right here, right now. While you and I may be living in or visiting the Upper Valley, we are also inhabitants of God's new creation. We may be in the

midst of a heated campaign, with consequential choices to be made in local, state, and federal elections, but our Christian faith boldly claims that we already have a ruler, a king – Jesus, who has chosen us.

Our Calvinist forebears talked about the predestination of the elect, of the fate of those individuals who were chosen by God to be saved. Nothing one could do would change one's status. One was in, or one was not. Our understanding of God has changed over the centuries. Today, when we mainline Protestants talk about election in the context of the Christian faith, we profess that all have been chosen, that all are the elect. However, while God freely offers redemption and hope, grace and reconciliation to one and all, God also calls upon us for a response:

You and I must choose to accept this gift.

You and I must open our hearts to the saving love that God wants to share with each of us.

You and I must recognize that we are standing at the foot of the cross, that before us is a sign proclaiming, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

As Christians, we are not only called to acknowledge this truth, but to share this message with one another, and all the world. We have been charged with telling a story, a story that some will welcome, and others will reject, a story that some will embrace and others will hear with fear, with caution, with skepticism. It matters not. The story must be told: The king is here, now, and he is in charge. Not you, not me. God. And this is a story that you and I need not only to share with others, it is one that we need to hear, too.

In a few minutes, we'll join together to say the familiar, perhaps too familiar, words of the Lord's Prayer. Have we really given thought to what it is we're asking God to do?

"Thy kingdom come." Really? Do we really want God's disruptive new creation to displace the familiar world we have built?

"Thy will be done." Really? Do we truly want God's will to be done or would we prefer to continue doing as we please?

"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Really? We have to let go of the claims, the resentments, the hold we may have on others? We have to let go of the claims, the resentments, the hold that others may have on us? Really? Really?

Are we really prepared for all of this? Are we really ready?

Yes, we are.

And if you don't believe it, remember that Jesus does.

Remember who he chose to be his disciples.

Remember who he trusted to carry on after he was gone.

Remember who he loved so much that he chose to give up everything and be enthroned on a cross.

People who were fallible, flawed, and yes, fallen. People like you and me.

The Romans thought they were being clever when they made that sign. They weren't though. Instead, they were unwittingly proclaiming the truth, a truth that could not, can not, will not be hidden, obscured, or denied.

So let us take up the words of those soldiers. In this campaign season, when we are inundated with ads and volunteers and messages from people competing for a job that comes with its own theme song, "Hail to the Chief," let us gratefully, joyfully, confidently proclaim "Hail to the real chief, hail to Jesus, hail to our king!"